

Statement of Congressman Pete Stark Introducing the Healthy Transition Act of 2008

Tuesday, 24 June 2008

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FOR THE CONGRESSIONAL RECORD

June 25, 2008

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Introducing the Healthy Transition Act of 2008

MR. STARK: Madam Speaker, I rise to introduce legislation aimed at addressing the unique needs of young people with serious mental illness as they transition from adolescence into adulthood. Senator Gordon Smith and Senator Chris Dodd are introducing identical legislation in the Senate. We have an obligation to provide appropriate and effective mental health treatment and supports to young adults so that they can transition to healthy and successful adults.

Young

adults suffering from mental illness fall through the cracks far too often. Senator Smith and I requested that the Government Accountability Office (GAO) examine this issue. The GAO recently issued their report and the findings should disturb us all. At least 2.4 million young adults age 18-26 suffer from serious mental illness. Another 9.3 million have mild or moderate mental illness. Currently, there is no specific federal program aimed at these youth. Instead, we are left with a fragmented and ad hoc system that does not meet their unique needs. Not surprisingly, many of these youth are adrift- without services, support, or guidance. They have lower education and employment rates than their peers and they are more likely to end up in jail or homeless. For youth who are aging out of foster care with no family supports the situation is particularly dire. One recent study found that these youth suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder at rates similar to Iraq War veterans.

The GAO

has clearly laid out the problem. But it is not enough to simply describe the current situation and become angry. Our outrage must lead to action. This legislation aims to change the tragic and unnecessary status quo and bring real support to millions of young people.

Some

states are making strides to connect young adults with mental illness to systems that can assist them. The GAO documented 4 states- Maryland, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Mississippi- that are doing good work in this area. My home state of California is using dedicated mental health funding to specifically target adolescents and young adults with

mental illness. I am pleased that states are undertaking this important work, but the federal government should and must play a role. There needs to be improved coordination among the many federal agencies that provide services to these youth. Most critically, there needs to be federal support and assistance to states committed to doing the right thing and creating innovative approaches to serve these youth. The Healthy Transition Act will do just that.

This bill builds on the successful Partnership for Youth in Transition Demonstration Program. It will provide grant funding to states to develop statewide coordination plans to assist adolescents and young adults with serious mental health disorders to acquire the skills and resources they need to make a healthy transition into adulthood. The state must specifically plan for youth who are in the juvenile justice system, the child welfare system, and those who have an education plan under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The bill will also provide grant funding for states to successfully implement their plans and create sustainability and comprehensive systems of care. Finally, the legislation will create a Committee of Federal Partners. The Committee will include representatives from all agencies that serve young adults as well as representatives from consumer and family advocacy organizations. The Federal Partners will evaluate the programs, provide technical assistance, and report to Congress on the progress being made.

As a nation, our children are our greatest and most precious resource. We should measure ourselves by how well we equip them to succeed and lead healthy and fulfilling lives. For young people with mental health disorders, we have an obligation to provide the supports and resources they need to make a healthy transition. This bill is a crucial step toward fulfilling that obligation.